

Exeter College, Oxford, 06/08/07, 11.15 am

I'd better start by introducing myself. I'm Dr Diane Dubois; I'm Drama programme leader at Lincoln University; I was the external examiner for the MA in scriptwriting at the University of Glamorgan; I also write plays. That will do by way of an introduction, I think.

Now let me find out a little bit about you: First thing to find out: who here has written a play? Keep your hands up.

Who has had one of their plays produced? Keep your hands up if that's you.

Who among you has had a play professionally produced?

Who has been paid for this?

Who makes enough money from playwriting to live on?

That's your first lesson! This is typical; even writers for theatre as important as David Edgar tend to be attached to universities, or get most of their money through other similar means besides their writing. Writing for TV, radio or film can be more lucrative, though, arguably, that kind of writing will give you less freedom: you have to fit in with the agendas of commissioning editors eager to keep viewing and listening figures, for example. There is, of course, a fair bit of 'hack-work' available writing episodes of soaps and dramas. You can make a living from this sort of writing. But I think it is fair to say that no one writes for theatre because they want to get rich.

Today I'm going to be talking about writing for theatre, as that's what I know most about, and, I believe, what you want to hear about. I'll talk about my own experiences of writing plays, and also about my experiences of teaching playwriting, in the hope that what I say might help you to reflect on your own work as writers for the theatre.

Before I do, I should mention the Writers' Guild; how many are members of this, or any similar organisation (there is an equivalent body for American writers, for example)? To join the Guild, you pay an annual fee, plus 10% of any earnings you make from writing. Now, many writers think—hold on a minute!—I already give 10% to their agents, then a hefty chunk goes to the tax man, and so the Guild would take another 10%, so there's half my money gone already; so why should I bother with membership of the Writers' Guild? It's just another organisation that wants a share of my hard-earned money. However, what the Guild is, first and foremost, is a trade union. So the Guild's negotiations with theatres, the BBC and so on, is what empowers your agents to negotiate fees on your behalf (does anyone here have an agent? I don't, but I am a Guild member). Also, you get regular email bulletins from the Guild, full of opportunities for writers; there is no point writing play after play, if there is nowhere to send it to, and so all those scripts just mount up under your bed. Also, the discipline of writing to a brief and a deadline can be very good for

you. As well as full membership of the Guild, student memberships and candidate memberships are available at reduced fees. So think about joining. Google 'Writers' Guild of Great Britain', and visit their website, where you'll find information for writers, as well as contact details and instructions on how to apply for membership.

My own experience as a writer for theatre began when I was working as an actor, while writing my PhD at Hull University. A Hull theatre director asked me, because he knew I was clever, if I thought I could write an adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, as that play was on the syllabus in schools and his theatre company wanted to explore working with schools in Hull (Hull has many failing schools, so there would be money available for his theatre company if he branched out into this kind of work—not that I ever saw any of that money!). I mention this to you because you should expect, for your first few plays, to write for free. However, don't let that continue for too long; establish your reputation as a writer, then ask for appropriate fees.

What's an appropriate fee? Hard to say! The Writers' Guild website has guidelines for fees for plays for professional theatre, and these are in turn split up into beginner's rates, and rates for more established writers. So what you get paid will be in accordance with the company you're writing for (so, if you are writing for a professional company, or if it's community theatre, or if it's a semi-professional company—all these things effect the rate of pay) and it will also depend on your experience and track record as a writer. Fees also vary in terms of how long the play is, and whether it's an original play, an adaptation or a devised piece. The Guild website can give you all the details that you need on this, and, if you're a member, the Guild can also give legal help if you think you are being ripped off. So check out their website. The important point to get across to you, however, is this: once you've written a few plays, don't let companies take advantage of you. Never sell yourself short. But, when you are just starting out, be prepared to give them your very best work for little or no money. Also, of course, be prepared to have your scripts returned to you, with a letter saying "thanks, but no thanks."

So I began writing plays through being an actor, and working and generally hanging around theatre companies. How many of you are actors? Being an actor is useful to a playwright, because that kind of experience will give you an insight into what works on stage. This is invaluable. That intimate knowledge of a script that you only really get when you rehearse and perform it again and again, really shows you the 'guts' of a play. Also, the immediate feedback that you get when you are in front of a live audience and performing will tell you a great deal about an audience's needs and expectations. Any script should take the needs of the audience into consideration; if you want to write for therapy, or for your own satisfaction, that's great, but don't inflict that on a paying audience!

So do try to do some acting, if you want to write plays. However, avoid, if at all possible, directing or acting in your own plays; as a writer, you will want to be out front, at rehearsals, so you can watch and listen, and see what in your script is working and what is not. You must be willing to change the script if it

is not working, if that's OK with your director. Your director might think that your play is just fine the way it is. Conversely, you must also be willing to cut or otherwise revise a script if the director asks you to; there is nothing more guaranteed to assure that you are never, ever, asked by that director to write for him or her again if you take a precious attitude to every word that you put on paper. I remember directing a play that needed drastic cutting and rewriting, and tearing my hair out in negotiations with the writer, who didn't want to do any sort of rewriting at all. She actually used the phrase "This play is my baby." No it isn't. It's a play. I made sure that I never worked with her again. So always be prepared for rewrites, even eleventh hour ones. Now . . .

I'm probably best known for a play I wrote in 1998 called *Myra and Me*. I rewrote that play throughout the rehearsals, and in the end, I had four versions of the play. One we used to premiere it before we took it up to the Edinburgh Fringe (you all know about the Fringe? More on the Fringe later). That was a good 'test drive' in front of an audience, and that helped me to produce another, better, tighter version, for the Fringe itself. The last version was for Hull Truck theatre, where it was produced after we returned from the Fringe. The other, penultimate cut was one of those eleventh hour rewrites that I mentioned a moment ago. Let me explain how that came about.

The 'Myra' in the play's title referred to Myra Hindley (do you know who she was?). As a result of this, the play was the subject to a lot of controversy in the media, largely from people who knew nothing about the play, hadn't seen it, hadn't read it; didn't even know what it was about. The result was that we were asked to leave the Gilded Balloon (our venue in Edinburgh) after our opening performance. The argument was that the Gilded Balloon, best known as a comedy venue, favoured the lighter side of the Fringe, and so my play was deemed unsuitable. This was clearly a lie: my play was a comedy, and that venue was also hosting *Krapp's Last Tape* (a play that has a few jokes in it, but you'd hardly describe it as a laugh a minute). The real reason behind our move was this: a big brewery sponsor, who will remain nameless, was financially backing the Gilded Balloon's chain of venues that year, and threatened to remove that financial support if my 'controversial' play was not closed down. The venue manager, Karen Koren, played an absolute blinder of a negotiation, in that she managed to get us moved from the Gilded Balloon (unofficially accepted as the second or third best venue at the Fringe) to the Assembly Rooms (probably the best venue at the Fringe). This was going to happen on the grounds that I didn't speak to the press before I gave the exclusive story to the Observer newspaper—who were financial backers of the Assembly Rooms that year. It's worth noting, then, the massive and complicated vested interests that happen behind the scenes. Never sacrifice your artistic integrity, but always be flexible, and try to see the bigger picture at all times. It's a scary fact that financial backers will try to dictate artistic policy if they think their investment might be at risk. So you have to walk a very wobbly tightrope between sticking to your guns, artistically, and making sure that the play goes on; 'the play's the thing', as they say, and an unperformed play is no play at all.

So we were on the move to the best and most important venue at the Fringe. Good news. Excellent news, really, and a very good outcome from what could have been a disaster. Only the slot available at the Assembly Rooms was twenty minutes shorter than the one we had had at the Gilded Balloon. So we had to open our show at the Gilded Balloon, then reload our set into the van, drive it across town, unload, and then prepare for a tech and dress at our new venue that was to take place at 2.30 that morning. That left me four hours to cut twenty minutes from the script. No sleep, no food, no beer—all very harsh. What was more, it was a convoluted play, made of many short interwoven scenes, so I could not just chop out great big sections; I had to unpick it, thread by thread, and put it back together again, only twenty minutes shorter. I worked on the principle of a minute a page (you know that guesstimate?), so when the little page counter at the corner of my laptop said I was twenty pages shorter, I knew I was about right. I used a printer in the press office at the venue to print out a script for the technicians, and as they replotted the lighting board and edited the sound effects on minidisk, I went through the cuts with the cast, who were wonderful, knew the play inside out, and so found the cuts easy to adjust to. Phew! So we were ready to open at the Assembly Rooms the next day. Imagine how counterproductive it would have been if I'd had a big hissy-fit about 'my baby'. We would not have had a show, and we might as well have packed up and gone home.

The play did well; I was nominated for a Fringe First, and got a Herald Angel award, and the reviews were good. The broadsheets, needless to say, liked the play better than the tabloids. I did more press, radio and TV interviews that year than anything I've been involved with before or since, and, as they say, no publicity is bad publicity. But a word of warning: never trust a tabloid journalist. You might think, looking at a tabloid, that the writers are none too clever or sophisticated, but that is simply not the case. They are highly educated, very shrewd, and know how to produce exactly the kind of copy their readers want to read. So when a reporter from the *Daily Record* rang me for an interview, and when he seemed to be really on my wavelength, I really thought my luck was in. So I opened up to him, told him exactly what the play was about, and why I wrote it, and, in doing so, mentioned how the media coverage of Hindley helped turn her into an icon of absolute evil, just as the media portrayal of Princess Diana turned her into an icon of absolute goodness. Imagine me, then, turning up in Edinburgh, going up to our venue's press office, pulling out our bulging file of pre-publicity press cuttings, and finding a full-page article from the *Daily Record* with a picture of me, superimposed with an image of Hindley's face, and a huge headline underneath saying 'Outrage as Playwright Compares Hindley to Diana'.

So mind how you go when dealing with the media; they are not there to help you, and they are not your friends! They have their own agendas, and they probably don't coincide with yours. *The Sun*, another redtop tabloid, called me "twisted and sick," which I reckon certifies my sanity and righthheadedness, but it's still a shock to see yourself referred to in print that way.

Still, newspapers are, as they say, 'tomorrow's fish and chip papers', and after the run, the media found someone else to plague, I'm sure. All in all, that

Edinburgh festival was a great experience, with a very steep learning curve, and it didn't earn me a penny, but I wouldn't have missed out on it for the world, because of all that I learned in the space of just under two months. I went on to write more plays for theatre, and have just finished my first play for radio, and I plan to keep writing as long as the urge to write is there.

I've also learned a great deal from teaching playwriting to my students in Lincoln. I believe that there is no better way to learn about any subject than to try to teach it to someone else. So I'll continue this talk by telling you about the kind of work I do with my students.

My first bit of advice I already mentioned a while back: know what works on stage, and write for your audience's needs. This involves basic things, like avoiding a proliferation of characters. Many students write plays with too many characters, both on stage and off. This is a bad idea: for one thing, if you want to get a play produced, never write for more than six characters—remember that every character needs an actor, and every actor needs a salary, and so huge casts will destine your script for the reject pile. Directors like two or three-handers, because they are cheap. The same applies to elaborate sets—does your play really have to be set in a huge, working fountain? Can it not happen on a park bench? These are things worth thinking about, if you'd ever like to see your play move from page to stage.

The main problem with having too many characters, however, is that this often makes the play's dialogue and story difficult to follow. If you think that you have too many characters, try merging two or more of them together; this can often make for a more interesting, multifaceted character. Imagine if Hamlet had been not one character, but four—one an ousted prince, one a suicidal student, one a detective and one in an unhealthy sort of love with his mother. How much better he is as an amalgamation of all four instead! In a similar vein, my students' characters often talk about characters who are not actually on stage, or who we never see, giving these absent characters names—my mate Phil, my Auntie Jean, your brother Paul, the neighbour's dog, Fifi—and, of course, the audience immediately forget all these names, and so can't follow the story, and then rapidly lose interest. Try to find ways of putting whatever it is you are trying to communicate directly in front of the audience. The cardinal rule of theatre is to show, and not tell.

The same is true for abstractions, like 'fear', or 'hate' or 'love': don't tell; show. Imagine how dull and unmoving Hamlet's famous 'to be or not to be' speech would have been had he instead said something like "I'm so depressed. I've been thinking about killing myself." Thankfully, Shakespeare didn't tell me that his character was suicidally depressed; he showed it to me; even better, he made me feel what that feeling might be like. So we talk a lot about 'concrete' writing, that is, writing that avoids abstractions like 'fear', or 'hate' or 'love' or 'suicidal depression', and instead makes the abstraction concrete, that is, palpable, and manifest right in front of your audience.

If your character is happy, show them being happy; never tell your audience by having them say, "I'm so happy!" If a character is angry with another

character, never have them say, “I’m so angry with you!” Enact that anger; embody it, in a scene, so we can experience what it feels like. Think beyond the obvious, too; if you want to show that one character is angry with another, don’t immediately resort to shouting or fist fights—less is often more.

Here’s a great example of terrible writing that might better illustrate what I mean. For this I’ll need two volunteer actors.

Scene

A park. Two girls sit on a park bench.

Karen: What’s the matter? You’re upset.

Lisa: So?

Karen: Come on, Lisa, you’ve been my best friend for nine years. You tell me everything. What’s wrong?

Lisa: I’m pregnant.

Karen: Oh my God. Who’s the father? It’s not Jake, my older brother, is it?

Lisa: Yeah.

Karen: But he’s sixteen and you’re only thirteen. I can’t believe you did this, Lisa. *(she walks off)*

Lisa: I thought you were supposed to be my best friend!

That was an example of terrible ‘exposition’. By that I mean that there is nothing wrong with the story, or the characters, but the way in which the story is told is deeply flawed. All the points in the story are there, and they’re fine: Lisa is upset; Karen, her best friend for nine years, and to whom she tells everything, knows that something is not right. It turns out that Lisa is pregnant, and, what is more, she is only thirteen. Worse still, the father turns out to be Jake, Karen’s sixteen-year-old brother. Karen is appalled, and deserts Lisa in her hour of need.

So there is nothing wrong with the story, or the characters, yet it is a terrible play. Why? The problem lies in the exposition. When I use this scene in class as the basis for an exercise, I get the students to rewrite the scene, using more skilful exposition. Thus, if the first point of the story to get across to the audience is that Lisa is upset, how can we show this to the audience, instead of having Karen say “What’s the matter? You’re upset.” If Lisa and Karen have been best friends for nine years, and tell each other everything, how can we show this to the audience, instead of having Karen say “Come on, Lisa, you’ve been my best friend for nine years. You tell me everything.” How do we

move the story forward, so that Lisa either confesses she is pregnant, or Karen guesses, from what Lisa says or does not say? How do we move the story further forward, so that Lisa either tells Karen that the father is Jake, or Karen guesses, again, from what Lisa says or does not say? And what makes Karen, Lisa's best friend for nine years, suddenly desert her, just when she most needs a friend?

This latter point takes me on to another important issue: that of subplot. One of the great pleasures of watching a play is that the audience gets to figure out what is really going on, underneath the dialogue and gestures. A good writer will make it clear to the audience what is going on below the surface, yet it is never glaringly obvious. Of course, knowing what this is can only come about if you know your characters inside and out. So you must ask yourself, what motivates Karen in this scene? Maybe she was never such a good friend all along, and she is finally showing her true colours? Maybe she enjoys bestowing and then removing her friendship on a whim, because this gives her some sort of twisted power kick? Only the writer can decide.

Having said that, if your characters that you have created are any good, they will make those kinds of decisions for you. D.H. Lawrence said that you should never try to nail anything down in your writing; if you try to do so, a well-written character will simply get up and walk away with the nail. What he means by that is that you cannot force your character to do something that she or he would not do. Above all, never be didactic. By all means write about pressing social issues such as domestic violence, gender politics or drug abuse, but remember that you are a playwright, and not a politician on a soapbox. Your concerns should be theatrical, and not 'issue-led'.

If you let your character develop freely, and listen to and watch your character carefully, she or he will reveal their motivations to you. This is what we mean when we say that a play is 'character-led': the characters tell the writer what must happen. This is the way to achieve 'dramatic truth': the search for this kind of truth can only begin by avoiding stereotypes, and being faithful to the full complexity of your characters. If you're stuck on how to progress your story, take a lesson from Raymond Chandler, who said that whenever he didn't know what was going to happen next in one of his detective novels, he would have someone walk into the room holding a gun. Then he'd deal with that new situation.

So start your play with characters, and go from there. Don't impose the plot on the characters; let your characters do what they will do and say what they will say. A good writer writes from 'scenes in the head'—the writer sees and hears the characters, almost as if they are on a stage inside the writer's head. The writer then writes the play by observing carefully and writing down what the characters say and do on that imaginary stage.

So how do you start with a character? I often start my workshops with a game that I call 'Mr Potato-Head': are you familiar with the children's toy, where you start with a potato as a head, and you add on ears, nose, mouth, hair and so on, until you have a character. This method is not without its flaws, but it does

work, and is a worthwhile exercise. Here's an example of how I play this writing game with my students:

I ask them to think of a character. What gender? What age?

What are they wearing? What is their occupation, if they have one?

What is their favourite colour? Why?

Are they a cat person or a dog person?

Is this person lonely? Does this person have a lot of friends?

Who do they live with/who are their family?

What do they hope for? What is their greatest fear?

They have a secret; what is it?

How honest is this character?

What is their name?

Study this character for five minutes; any other detail that comes to you—write it down.

Then, one at a time, I ask the students to 'hot seat' their character (do you know what I mean by that?); I ask them not to take their piece of paper with them; I ask them to internalise the character, and respond to all questions as if they were that character.

Because I work with Drama students, they are quite comfortable with acting, and know how to sustain an improvisation. So in the next stage is, that I will get two of these characters together and devise a scene around them, based on something like this:

What is the relationship of these characters to each other? Mother and son; brother and sister; friends or neighbours; strangers on a train; whatever.

Where are you? On a train; at a funeral; over the garden fence; whatever.

Character 1 wants some thing (a book, say) from character 2.

You ask character 1: What is the book? Why do you want it?

You ask character 2: Why have you got it?

Having done this, I have effectively set up a very simple plot. We then run this simple plot on improv.

As a result, we might have the makings of a play about a mother and son who meet at a funeral—maybe her husband and his father’s funeral—which is a promising start.

The next stage is to invest the devised piece with a bit of subplot:

Character 1 also wants something else from character 2, but it is something intangible—an abstraction, in other words. What is it? Love? Forgiveness? Praise? Recognition? An answer to some question? **DON’T OVERTLY TELL** character 2 what it is that you want! Let it come out obliquely, through the discussion over the book (or whatever).

As a result, we might now have the makings of a play about a mother and son who meet at her husband and his father’s funeral. She asks to borrow a book from him, but really, more importantly, she wants to get closer to him.

You will notice from this that the resulting plot is not unnecessarily detailed or convoluted or otherwise sensational; the thorough understanding of the characters is foremost. You don’t have to have a character walk into a room with a gun, as Chandler would have it; your character can walk into a room holding a book. Or simply walk into the room. Look at Harold Pinter’s play, *The Caretaker*, for a master class in putting two characters together, then introducing a third one, then taking one of the original two out, and endlessly shuffling them like this, in the end producing a gripping play about nothing more than three people sharing a room.

So you don’t need gun-toting gangsters or other similar, sensational twists in the plot to write a great play. By way of illustration of the validity of this, I’d like to point out that there are no car chase scenes in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett’s characters are explored in real depth and detail; they are well-rounded, and their inner lives explored fully. Their situation is a very simple one: they are waiting. Yet it is a gripping play, full of action.

What do I mean by action? Anyone who has studied Stanislavski will know. It is best illustrated in his famous exercise in *An Actor Prepares*, where the drama teacher gets one after another of his students to go up and simply sit on the stage. Let me read it to you:

(read excerpt from *An Actor Prepares*)

So the most important kind of ‘action’ on the stage concerns the inner life of the character. Never feel that sensational things must be constantly happening, in order to keep your audience ‘entertained’. Never feel that ingenious twists of plot are necessary to the creation of a compelling piece of theatre. Remember that you are writing a script, that is, a blueprint for a performance, written to enable a theatrical event to take place. As such, a script is not a finished product, like a poem or a novel. That is because, unlike a poem or a novel, a script is not a thing that is written to be read. It is written to be performed. I therefore urge you all to take the opportunity, whenever it

presents itself, to have your words taken from the page and on to the stage, at writers' groups, through rehearsed readings, or staging by good quality amateur theatre companies. Experience the ways in which your written word might be translated into speech and movement, and learn from this.

I said I'd mention the Edinburgh Festival again, and this is a good time to do so. Who has been? The Fringe is an excellent place to see terrific theatre. It is also an excellent place to see terrible theatre. Either way, as playwrights, you can learn from this. Why not form a theatre company and take your play up there? Expect to lose money, and not make any, and you will have a ball. It's great experience, and also an excellent showcase for your talents.

Of course, even with great characters, skilful exposition and a simple plot, a play will still not work if the dialogue is poor. Dialogue must be sensitively written, full of nuances and carefully rendered cadence; the language must possess sufficient personal quirks to make the characters seem very real. How can you go about achieving this? One way is to make sure that you keep a notebook with you at all times, because you never know when you might overhear something that would make an excellent piece of dialogue. Record any brilliant ideas that might pop into your head while on the bus or in the bath. Whatever it is, get it down on paper, and don't lose it! Use your notebook unselfconsciously. No one need ever see what you put down in it, unless you want them to.

I have an exercise that I do to improve my students' dialogue writing skills that involves a pack of cards. I take a pack of ordinary playing cards and remove the aces, jacks, queens and kings, leaving just the numbers. Each student decides on a character whose dialogue they want to work on. Each student then picks a card at random. Suits relate to the source of the character's powers, or to key personality traits. So, for example, we could nominate hearts to equal a character who is ruled by their emotions; diamonds could equal intellect; clubs a character who lives by their intuition; spades a character who is very physical. The face values of the cards we equate to status. 2 is the lowest status of character; 10 is the highest. Status might equate with confidence, so a status of 2 makes you very shy and insecure, and a status of 10 means that you are a very secure extrovert. So let's say you drew the 10 of diamonds. That makes for a very confident, dominant and dominating character who is first and foremost an intellectual. I then ask the students to rewrite their character's dialogue accordingly.

Let's go back to our play about a mother and son who meet at the father's funeral. She asks to borrow a book from him, but really, and more importantly, underneath it all, she wants to get closer to her son. He, however, is now, after having drawn the ten of diamonds, a very confident intellectual. (So maybe he is the author of the book she wants to borrow? Maybe she says she wants to borrow it and read it, though she knows that it will most probably go way over her head?) I think that you can already start to hear the voices of those characters more clearly in your heads now, so listen to them, and write down what they say to each other, and, maybe even more importantly, what they don't, or cannot say to each other.

You can try some of these exercises alone, or form a writers' group, and play these games together. One advantage of being a member of a writers' group is that the discipline of having to write for a weekly meeting can be very motivating. Also, other writers can be massively supportive. Having said that, the reverse can also be true. One particular writer had it in for me, and constantly tried to undermine me every time we met. One day, over a beer or seven, I was amazed to get a full apology from her. She confessed that she had been jealous of me all along, and that she saw me as competition. My response was to say to her, "Well, that was very brave of you to admit that, but I must say that I never, ever saw you as competition." So be prepared for a degree of bitchiness that can be quite breathtaking.

Other factors to consider when you write a play are things like structure and chronology. Films tell their stories in short scenes that flit about all over the place, through time and through space. Plays tend not to do that. Think about the wisdom of Aristotle, and his three unities of time, space and action. You can write a wonderful play that is set in one room, over the space of one hour, that involves something as simple as passing the time before a funeral. Make sure that your play resembles a script for contemporary theatre, and not for melodrama, soap opera, television or film.

Handle your exposition, pacing, and build-up of tension with a lightness of touch; make sure that every word, including stage directions and set description, subtly enhances our understanding of the characters and their situation; the play may make use of striking imagery, or innovative techniques, but above all it must be controlled, concrete and clear.

Take the time to consider mechanical considerations, such as spelling and punctuation; grammar and syntax; it is vital that your reader knows that any quirk of spelling or grammar belongs to your character, and not to you! You don't want to come across on paper as a semi-literate fool. This is especially true if you are in the habit of sending off unsolicited scripts to theatres. If you have used an incorrect or off-the-wall script format, or if your script is littered with typographical or other errors, you may well be providing it with a shortcut to the reject pile. Make sure that you proofread, polish, draft and redraft until the play is fit to be seen.

You might want to keep a separate journal, or logbook alongside your notebook. Use it to reflect on your writing activities from day one, and to make a note of your observations. This is useful to your work as a writer, as it feeds back directly into your creative activities.

Read and see plays! Most writers of plays start out as avid play readers and theatre-goers. Arthur Miller famously sat and laboriously copied out passages of Shakespeare by hand, so that he could learn from the master by getting up close to the words that Shakespeare wrote. Like acting, it is a way of getting to the guts of a play, and really seeing how it works on the page.

By all means read books on scriptwriting, and academic or theoretical texts about writing and about writers. There are lots of really useful books out there that will help you to think more deeply about your writing, and the writing of others. If you do this, make sure that most of your research is done on the writing of plays, and not on the subject matter of the play that you are writing. Remember: you are a playwright, and not an historian or a social scientist.

Always reflect on your writing, and keep asking questions about the play that you are working on. It may seem sensible to follow the old adage and 'write about what you know', but you will produce a much more compelling script if you write about what you *want* to know. That can be as simple, and as profound, as wanting to know what makes your characters tick.

Above all, to be a writer, it is very important that you write. A lot of writers forget that! It is easily done, as we love to talk about writing, over the aforementioned beers, and that often seems preferable to the isolation and the hard graft of actually putting pen to paper, or finger to keyboard. So make sure that you write all the time, and try to write a little every day if possible. Some days will be massively productive, and ideas will flow thick and fast, and other days it will feel like pulling teeth. Those days will require more sustained effort, possibly with little or nothing to show for it at the end. Persevere. Some writers repeatedly abandon work in progress, exactly when sustained effort is what is needed. When the going gets tough, keep going; do not give into the temptation to throw a script away and start from scratch. Try to figure out what is wrong with the script, and then, if possible, put it right.

You'll discover lots of new ideas as you get down to the actual writing. Do not waste time trying to avoid the dreaded blank piece of paper. Writing is a job, like any other, and involves more perspiration than inspiration, so avoid procrastination. One of the best pieces of advice I ever got was this: "Do not sit around all day waiting for the white dove of inspiration to come along and crap on your head. There is no such bird."

A final piece of advice, which I got from Hilary Strong, who was in charge of the Edinburgh Fringe, in 1998, was this: "It's a long game." So don't get frustrated, keep learning, keep improving, and never give up. Above all, keep playing that game, and make sure that you enjoy every minute.